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Empathy as the Factor of Moral Dilemma Solving in Adolescence

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Abstract

The analysis of empathy influence on moral dilemma solving in adolescence is done. Significant correlations between empathy level and strategies of moral dilemma solving are revealed. High empathy level, mutual expectations and social acceptance correlates with care strategy and context-depending strategy. The lowest empathy level was found for egoistic strategy. Gender differences in empathy level were found – girls are orientated on empathy more than boys. Adolescents from towns showed higher level of empathy than their peers from cities.

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Keywords: moral development, empathy, adolescence, strategies of moral dilemma solving, gender differences.

1. Introduction

Moral development is the complicated process. There is different understanding of the basis of moral development. Two main approaches to the study of moral development (normative cognitive and empathy approaches) with two basic principles were outlined: justice (J. Piaget, L. Kohlberg) and care (C. Gilligan) [1], [2]. Justice principle is based on cognitive aspects of moral consciousness - moral thinking and moral judgments, that are considered to be the criteria of the level of moral development [3]. Care orientation theory concentrates on empathy as the main principle lying in the nature of moral action. Emotional orientation on needs, ideas and desires of other people is in the focus of attention [4]. Nowadays the idea of integrating process of moral decision-making is popular and most authors recognize that emotions play an important role in moral solutions (N. Eisenberg, J. Rest) [5, 6].

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There are different emotional conditions that can influence on moral decisions: guilt, shame, distress, sympathy, empathy and etc. Empathy is regarded as the ability to feel with other and to understand and share his (her) emotions. It consists of different components: physiological, cognitive, emotional and behavioral (C.Zahn-Waxler and etc.) [7]. Human's empathy has a social-cultural nature and it develops through several stages beginning from infancy (M.Hoffman) [8]. The role of family education for empathy development is very high. The parents attitude determines the child's ability to recognize emotions and feelings and to be able to share them and feel with others in childhood (M.Hoffman, W.Damon) The moral atmosphere including empathy begins to play an important role in moral dilemma solving. [9]. The determined strategies of moral dilemma solving can have correlations with emotional reactions.

2. The present study

The aims of the study were:

- to define empathy correlations with the strategies of moral dilemma solving in adolescence.
- to define gender differences in empathy level.
- to determine differences in empathy level for adolescences from small towns and big city.

3. Method

4.1 Participants

The data was collected in Russia. The investigation was realized in one city - Moscow and two towns - Upravlencheskij (Samara region) and Shatura (Moscow region). The data consists of 346 subjects aged from 13 to 21. There are 40% of boys and 60% of girls. Three age groups are presented: 38% of teenagers aged from 13 to 15, 42% of adolescents aged from 15 to 17, and 20% of subjects aged from 18 to 21.

4.2 Measures

We used the questionnaire by A.Mehrabian-N.Epstein to define the empathy level. The questionnaire consists of 33 statements and you have to agree or disagree with each of the statement.

One of the aims of the study was to investigate how empathy correlates with the strategies of moral dilemma solving. We defined the strategies of moral dilemma solving in our previous study but we find it necessary to indicated here the instruments we used for that goal [10]. The special set of instruments was used:

- M. Rockich values technique modified for our aims. The list of terminal and instrument values was changed to combine values in two groups according to the justice and care principle. The subjects were administered to form hierarchy of values of both groups and to estimate how they realize these values in their real-life behavior.
- Original questionnaire "Justice-Care". Subjects have to agree or disagree with 38 statements corresponding to normative scales of moral development (by L.Kohlberg and C.Gilligan), using the five-point scale.
- Moral dilemmas, modified from the MAMOS project (A. Podolskij, P. Heymans) [11], were constructed to choose between care or justice principle. Two moral dilemmas were presented, each has its own communicational context: "adult-adolescent" and "adolescent-peer". Subjects were to make moral choice in the uncompleted situation. In each dilemma teenagers were to find and estimate the decision of the hero and himself on the hero's position.
- the value orientation questionnaire by S.Schwartz that mark out 10 value orientations (motivation types).

5. Results

The first aim of our study was to investigate how empathy correlates with the strategies of moral dilemma solving in adolescence.

In our previous study we defined 6 strategies of moral dilemma solving according to the results: care strategy, justice strategy, context-depending strategy, paradox-contextual strategy, the strategy of doubts and egoistic strategy. The subjects solved 2 dilemmas with different communicational context both for the heroes and themselves. Care, justice or own interests were the principles of their choice. Each strategy has also its specific with preferred moral judgments, moral values and value orientations.

The strategies of moral dilemma solving are presented in the table 1.

Table #1. Strategies of moral dilemma solving.

Strategies	Dilemmas with communicational context			
	Adolescent-adult		Adolescent-peer	
	Hero	himself	hero	himself
Care Strategy	Care	care	care	care
Context-depending strategy	justice	justice	care	care
Justice strategy	justice	justice	justice	justice
Strategy of doubts	care or justice	justice or care	care or justice	care
Paradox-contextual strategy	care	care	justice	justice
Egoistic strategy	own interest	own interest	care or refuse	care or refuse

Care strategy is characterized by the orientation on care in all versions of moral dilemma. It correlates with terminal value of kindness, love for people, altruism, readiness to self-sacrifice for other people. Instrumental values such as trust in people, sensitivity to somebody needs, communicative competence, faithfulness, traditions are also important for these adolescents. Subjects prefer moral judgments that belongs to the level of 3 and 4 stages of Kohlberg theory (the moral of “good” boy and the stage of social law). That let us suppose that social esteem and acceptance is very important for them. There is a strong correlation with the high level of empathy.

Justice strategy orientates on justice principle in all versions of moral dilemma. The priority value is the respect of the personality of others. Bravery to hold own interests, capacity for leadership and education are also very important. The self-esteem of self-regulation is higher then in other groups. The empathy level is average.

Context-depending strategy is characterized by the orientation on care in interaction with peers and justice in interaction with adults. The values of kindness, readiness for self-sacrifice and bravery to hold own interests are important. Ability to be useful, education, law-abiding are important instrumental values. The level of empathy is higher then for justice strategy but lower than for care strategy.

Egoistic strategy is orientated on own interests. The most important value is the care about self wellbeing, capability to be leader and adherence to principle. Moral judgments about social law are most important for them (4 stage). The lowest empathy level was found for egoistic strategy.

Strategy of doubts is orientated on care values but not so constant as for care strategy. Kindness, respect of the personality of others, sincerity, law-abiding and honesty. There is a high consent with moral judgment of 3 and 6 stages of Kohlberg theory (the moral of “good” boy and universal ethical principles). The empathy level is average.

Paradox-contextual strategy is more orientated on terminal value of justice. Important instrumental values are bravery to hold own interests, autonomy and independence, capability to be leader and law-abiding. The empathy level is average.

The results showed significant correlations between empathy level and strategies of moral dilemma solving. Adolescents with higher level of empathy prefer care principle in moral values, moral judgments. In the field of moral dilemma solving the empathy level correlates with care strategy and context-depending strategy. Mutual expectations, social acceptance, empathy reflection position correlates with these strategies. The lowest empathy level was found for egoistic strategy.

The second aim of our study was to investigate gender differences in empathy level.

The results showed that girls are more orientated on empathy than boys in verbal questionnaire (0.46 with $p=0.01$). That gender differences in empathy level supported the fact that girls more than boys prefer care strategy and context-depending strategy that was shown in previous investigations [12] At the same time no age differences are found – gender differences stays stable through different groups inside adolescence.

The third aim of the study was to investigate the differences in empathy level for adolescences from small towns and big city. We compared teenagers from big city Moscow and two small towns in Russia: Upravlencheskij (Samara region) and Shatura (Moscow region). Adolescences from the towns showed higher level of empathy than their peers from the city (0.41 with $p=0.01$). That fact supported the previous findings that teenagers from small towns are orientated more on care strategy than justice strategy comparing to adolescents from big city [12]. It is worth to be mentioned that no significant differences between teenagers from two small towns were found. This is a surprising result taking into account the fact that these two small towns belonged to different regions of Russian Federation.

The conclusions of the study are the following. The results showed significant correlations between empathy level and strategies of moral dilemma solving. Adolescents with higher level of empathy prefer care principle in moral values, moral judgments. In the field of moral dilemma solving the empathy level correlates with care strategy and context-depending strategy. Mutual expectations, social acceptance, empathy reflection position correlates with these strategies. The lowest empathy level was found for egoistic strategy. Gender differences in empathy level were found – girls are orientated on empathy more than boys. Adolescences from towns showed higher level of empathy that their peers from cities.

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